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ABSTRACT

Legislation is being considered to authorize grants from the Department of Education for dropout prevention programs, reentry demonstration programs, and high school programs for certain welfare recipients instead of mandatory work or job training. There is also a call for the use of Job Training Partnership Act Summer Youth Program funds to be used year-round for basic and remedial education for teenage welfare recipients. The need for federal involvement with the dropout problem is demonstrated by the difficulties in obtaining good data on dropouts. Comparisons are nearly impossible since states and local school districts have different definitions and counting procedures. The national estimates which are widely used place the dropout rate between 14 and 29 per cent. Often the students who drop out have not done well in school, but for each individual, a host of possible reasons may be identified. It is difficult to develop prevention efforts and reentry programs which will successfully address all of the possible factors. For some dropouts numerous social and personal problems are so severe that having a diploma may not make much of a difference in their ability to obtain and maintain employment. From this perspective, programs that attempt simply to get more students through school may be difficult to justify. (VM)

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HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

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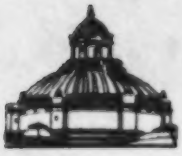

by

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Congressional Research Service

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HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

SUMMARY

Should Federal legislation be enacted to help students complete high school? At issue is whether Congress should respond to growing concern about the many students who drop out before getting a diploma. Currently legislation is being considered to authorize new Department of Education grants for dropout prevention and reentry demonstration programs; to authorize States to permit or require certain welfare recipients to enroll in high school programs instead of mandatory work or job-training; and to allow Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) Summer Youth Program funds to be used year-round for basic and remedial education for teenage welfare recipients.

Good data on the number of high school dropouts are difficult to obtain. States and local school districts have different definitions of dropouts and different procedures for counting. Generally comparisons cannot be made among them. Several national estimates, however, are widely used. The Department of Education estimates that 29% of all students who enter the ninth grade do not graduate 4 years later. High School and Beyond, a representative survey of 1980 high school sophomores, shows that 14% drop out before the end of their senior year. The former figure overestimates the national dropout rate since some students who do not graduate in 4 years continue to be enrolled, while the latter underestimates it since some students drop out before their sophomore year. Whatever the actual percentage, the number of dropouts is not small: if 20% of all students dropout at some point, then each year the number of new dropouts would total more than 750,000. As best can be determined, the dropout rate is higher today than 20 years ago.

Students who drop out often have not done well in school. In comparison to students who graduate, their grades were generally lower and their ages higher, suggesting that they had earlier repeated a year. They are more likely to have been suspended or expelled and to have felt they could not get along with their teachers. However, for many students it is difficult to identify the basic reason why they dropped out. Often their academic problems originate in the schools they attended earlier, in their families, or in their communities. To be successful, it would seem that dropout prevention and reentry programs would have to address the many factors that influence students to leave school. Yet, for schools to try to deal with family and community problems may be inordinately ambitious.

Compared to high school graduates, dropouts generally have more difficulty getting a good job. They do not earn as much money, and they are more likely to be poor. They may generate substantial social costs as well. Yet, it is difficult to estimate accurately the costs of not completing school. The effects of dropping out cannot easily be separated from the effects of other characteristics dropouts have. For some, having a diploma may not make much difference. From this perspective, programs that attempt simply to get more students through school may be difficult to justify.

ISSUE DEFINITION

Should Federal legislation be enacted to help students complete high school? At issue is whether Congress should respond to growing concern about the many students who drop out before getting a diploma. A higher percentage of students apparently drops out today than 20 years ago.

Few people doubt the importance of completing high school. In comparison to graduates, adults without diplomas generally have more difficulty getting a good job. On average, they earn less money and are more likely to be poor. They are more likely to need public assistance and to be convicted of a crime. Yet it is difficult to estimate accurately the costs of not graduating. The effects of dropping out cannot easily be separated from the effects of other characteristics dropouts have. For some, not having a diploma might not make much difference. In this respect, programs that attempt simply to get more students through school may be difficult to justify.

While dropouts often had low grades in high school, their academic troubles frequently originate in problems in their earlier schooling, in their families, or in their communities. Thus it often is difficult to identify the reasons why students drop out. Symptoms and causes get confused. To be successful, dropout prevention and reentry programs seemingly would have to address the many factors that influence students to leave school. However, it may be inordinately ambitious for schools to try to deal with family and community problems.

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

How Many Students Drop Out of School?

There are several sources of data on the number of students who drop out of school before obtaining a diploma. All have limitations. One problem is that the sources provide different answers to the question of how many students drop out. A second is that they do not permit accurate measurement of subsequent reentry and school completion. Third, generally comparisons cannot be made among States or local communities. Steps to improve dropout statistics are included in some of the legislation being considered by Congress.

National Estimates

Consider three widely quoted figures of the national dropout rate:

> Twenty-nine percent of all students who enter the ninth grade do not graduate from high school 4 years later. (U.S. Department of Education graduation rate.)
>
> Fourteen percent of high school sophomores drop out before the end of their senior year. (High School and Beyond Survey.)

Fourteen percent of youth age 18 or 19 years neither have completed high school nor are enrolled in school. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey.)

The **graduation rate** that appears on the U.S. Department of Education's annual "wall chart" comparison of States sometimes is interpreted to mean that more than one in four students drops out of high school. However, students who do not graduate with their classmates may still be enrolled in school and might obtain a diploma. Some who have left school return to graduate or go directly on to postsecondary education without a diploma. (Note that people described in the last sentence might or might not be considered dropouts, depending on the particular definition.) Moreover, as the Department's comparisons are based only on public school students, those who transfer to private schools do not get counted as graduates. Thus the 29% figure is too high an estimate of the national dropout rate.

The **High School and Beyond Survey** (administered by the U.S. Department of Education) suggests that the national dropout rate is about 14%. But this estimate, based upon a 1980 survey of a representative sample of high school sophomores and a follow-up survey 2 years later, excludes students who left before the spring of their sophomore year. The survey also did not include students who were absent the day the questionnaire was distributed. Many dropouts would not be counted.

The **Current Population Survey** (CPS) estimate includes among those completing high school people who have obtained equivalency certificates rather than diplomas. (High school equivalency certificates can be obtained by passing examinations such as the General Educational Development Test administered by the American Council on Education.) Some people doubt whether equivalency certificates are comparable to diplomas. The CPS also does not include people living on military bases or in institutions. Dropout rates can be high for both groups. In addition, some 18 and 19-year olds who are enrolled in high school later drop out. As an estimate of the national dropout rate, the CPS figure is too low.

While none of the three figures just mentioned is a satisfactory measure of the national dropout rate, together they do indicate that the number of students who leave school without a diploma is not small. If 20% of all students drop out at some point, then each year the number of new dropouts would total more than 750,000. From any perspective, this number is sizable.

Historical Trends

The proportion of Americans graduating from high school has increased substantially during the twentieth century. TABLE 1 shows that in the school year ending in 1900 there were about 6 new graduates per 100 persons 17 years of age, while in the school year ending in 1985 there were about 73 per 100. The highest ratio occurred in the 1969 school year when there were over 77 new graduates for each 100 17-year olds. While reliable dropout rates for any one year cannot be calculated from these data (since students who do not graduate may remain in school), it is

reasonable to assume that changes in the ratio of dropouts generally have varied inversely to changes in the ratio of graduates. Thus from 1900 to 1969 the national dropout rate probably declined more or less steadily (though it did rise during World War II), while from 1969 to 1980 it probably increased. The rate apparently has declined since 1980, though it was still higher in 1985 than it was in 1969.

TABLE 1. Number of High School Graduates Compared with Population 17-Years of Age

School Year	Number per 100	School Year	Number per 100
1900	6.4	1970	76.9
1910	8.8	1972	75.5
1920	16.8	1974	74.4
1930	29.0	1976	73.7
1940	50.8	1978	73.0
1950	59.0	1980	71.4
1960	69.5	1981	71.8
1964	76.7	1982	72.8
1966	76.4	1983	73.3
1968	76.3	1984	73.9
1969	77.1	1985	73.3

Source: Digest of Education Statistics 1987, p. 83.

Estimates for Different Groups

Some groups of students have higher dropout rates than others. Most information about such differences is available from the High School and Beyond Survey that was discussed above. However, as this survey did not include students who had left school before the spring of their sophomore year or who were absent when the questionnaire was distributed, it underestimates actual dropout rates. Estimates for minority groups may be particularly low. Consequently, the following data should be used with caution.

TABLE 2. Dropout Rates for High School Sophomores in 1980

All students	13.6%
Males	14.7
Females	12.6
Whites	12.2
Blacks	17.0
Hispanics	18.0
Native Americans/Alaskans	29.2
Asian/Pacific Islanders	3.1
Urban	18.9
Suburban	11.8
Rural	12.8
Northeast	11.3
North Central	12.0
South	15.2
West	16.6

Since it is projected that blacks and Hispanics will represent an increasingly larger proportion of the Nation's youth in the future, it is possible that the overall dropout rate will grow as well. The projected increase of black and Hispanic students is particularly likely to raise the dropout rate if they remain economically and socially disadvantaged.

State and Local Data

Counts of dropouts are available for many schools and local school districts. However, these counts and the dropout rates based upon them must be used with great caution. Only rarely can they be used to compare one school district with another. Part of the problem is that there is no common definition of a "dropout:" districts use different standards for determining when students have left one school and not enrolled in another. Habitual truants, for example, may be considered dropouts by one district after 30 days but not until after 90 by another. Students leaving due to pregnancy are counted by some but not by others. Answers vary on whether students who subsequently enroll in adult education programs should be viewed as transfers or dropouts.

School districts also use different procedures for counting dropouts. Some count only students who are definitely known to have left while others also count those whose status is unclear. In some cases, it cannot be determined what has become of students who no longer attend school. In addition, counts are made at different times during the year.

Finally, school districts use different methods to calculate dropout rates. Some rates are based only on counts of students who drop out in a given year (annual dropout rates) while others are cumulative counts of

all students who dropped out previously (cohort dropout rates). Some counts are compared with pupil enrollment figures, while others are matched with attendance data. Adjustments may be made for migration into and out of the district. The larger the comparison figure used, the lower the district's dropout rate will appear.

Just as school districts collect data on dropouts differently, so do States. Estimates for one State generally cannot be accurately compared with those for others. Moreover, estimates based upon aggregation of local counts may not be very reliable. Useful comparisons among States can be obtained only by cautiously making inferences from data on educational attainment: the graduation rates prepared by the Department of Education for its annual "wall charts" (but note the limitations described above), or the percentages of high school graduates among adults of different age groups that the Bureau of the Census calculates from the decennial census (though these do not take into account migration from one State to another).

Why Do Students Drop Out of School?

Student and School Factors

To understand why students drop out of school, it is helpful to compare them to students who graduate. Not surprisingly, students who leave before obtaining a diploma are more likely to have had difficulty in school. According to an analysis of High School and Beyond survey data, dropouts as a group had lower standardized test scores and lower grades (as sophomores, for example, they reported having "mostly Cs," while those who remained reported having B averages). Dropouts tend to be older, suggesting that they had earlier been retained in a grade. They often have lower educational aspirations. They were less likely to participate in extra-curricular activities, particularly athletics. They were more likely to have been suspended or expelled. Many dropouts, according to the survey, felt that they could not get along with teachers or did not belong in school. (Donald A. Rock et al., Who Drops Out of School?: Findings from a National Study)

Dropout rates are higher in some schools than in others. A study comparing Chicago high schools having similar student bodies found that dropouts rates were higher in schools with weak leadership, less order and discipline, worse attendance, higher failure rates, less active instruction, and less interaction between teachers and students. Problems common to all the schools in the study also affected dropping out, such as a culture of "cutting" classes, lax attendance monitoring, limited attention to individual students, teacher burnout, and gangs. (Chicago Panel on Public School Policy and Finance, "Where's Room 185?": How Schools Can Reduce Their Dropout Problem.)

Family and Community Factors

Focusing just on characteristics of students and schools ignores other reasons students leave school without a diploma. Family characteristics also are important. High School and Beyond data show that

students from families with low socioeconomic status are 3 times more likely to drop out than those from high socioeconomic status families. Part of the explanation may be that their homes have fewer books and other learning resources. Perhaps their parents do not help or encourage them as much. Their parents may have lower educational expectations for them. Students also are more likely to drop out if they do not live with both natural parents. Family turmoil, particularly if it ends in separation or divorce, affects schoolwork. Other family problems -- unemployment, alcoholism, illness, and death -- take their toll as well.

Pregnancy is an important reason a number of female students drop out. Each year approximately 1 million teenagers become pregnant, and about half of them give birth. Young mothers find it particularly difficult to complete high school if they become parents before age 17. (For additional information about the effect of pregnancy and other family factors on high school completion, see CRS Report 87-290 EPW, The Educational Attainment of Select Groups of "At Risk" Children and Youth, by James B. Stedman.)

In some communities students do not have much incentive to finish high school. If students have few prospects of going on to college or having a career, they may decide, rightly or wrongly, that dropping out of school will make no difference. If employment opportunities are limited, a diploma may not seem worth the effort. Where many students drop out, failure to complete high school may not carry any stigma.

Many dropouts are affected by a number of the factors mentioned above. Students from families with problems are more likely to get low grades. Students in academic trouble generally feel they do not belong in school. Students alienated from school often doubt they can go on to college or get a good job. If their schools are weak, they may not get adequate help. If their communities are poor, their schools may be weak. The interrelationship of these factors makes it difficult to identify the basic reasons why students drop out. It also makes it difficult to devise successful dropout prevention programs.

What are the Consequences of Dropping Out?

Students who drop out of school often have many disadvantages in life. In comparison to high school graduates, for example, adults without diplomas are less likely to be employed or to have good jobs. They do not earn as much income and are more likely to be poor. Adults without diplomas also have adverse consequences for society. Among other things, they generally pay less taxes and are more likely to need welfare.

However, it is difficult to measure either the individual or social costs of not completing high school. The effects of dropping out cannot easily be separated from the effects of other characteristics dropouts have. Conceivably, the reasons people leave school may themselves be responsible for most of the consequences popularly attributed to dropping out; lack of diplomas per se may make little difference. Consider income. A number of studies show that the relationship between earnings and years of educational attainment is very important. For example, in analyzing

Panel Study of Income Dynamics data to explain differences in the 10-year average hourly earnings of white men, Greg Duncan found that years of schooling accounted for twice the variation of any other variable tested, including family background, ability, motivation, and sense of efficacy. (Years of Poverty, Years of Plenty, pp. 110-111) On the other hand, Christopher Jencks' and Michael Olneck's analysis of several sources of income data indicates that educational attainment prior to college may not be very significant (Who Gets Ahead? p. 189):

> Our findings place a number of widespread presumptions in doubt. The most significant of these is that high school dropouts are economically disadvantaged largely because they fail to finish school. Our results suggest that the apparent advantages enjoyed by high school graduates derive to a significant extent from their prior characteristics, not their schooling. Unless high school attendance is followed by college education, its economic value appears quite modest.

Whether similar conclusions apply to other individual and social costs attributed to dropping out is not known.

The following paragraphs present earnings, employment, and poverty data for adults with different levels of educational attainment. Since the data do not differentiate between the effects of dropping out and the effects of other characteristics dropouts have, they do not show the cost of failing to complete school per se.

Earnings

High School dropouts on average earn much less income than graduates. In 1984, men aged 25 to 64 years with earnings who had dropped out of high school had average earnings of $16,312, about 78% of the average earnings of those who had graduated but not attended college ($20,798) and about 56% of the average earnings of those who had gone on to college ($29,289). If men of those ages had left school before ninth grade, they earned even less than high school dropouts. The comparable figures for women were $7,929 for dropouts, $10,570 for graduates who had not attended college, and $15,312 for those who had. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Money Income of Households, Families, and Persons in the United States: 1984 (CPS Series P-60, no. 151, table 34.))

Employment

High School dropouts are less likely to participate in the labor force, that is, either to have a job or to be looking for work. In 1985, only 76% of men 25 to 64 years old without a diploma were labor force participants, while 90% of such men who were high school graduates, but did not attend college, were. (For high school graduates who had gone on to college, the participation rate was even higher. For women, the comparable participation rates were 44% and 63%, respectively.)

Dropouts are also more likely to be unemployed. Among men aged 25 to 64 years who participate in the labor force, those without a diploma had an unemployment rate of 11% in 1985, while those with a diploma but no

college attendance had a rate of 7%. (The comparable percentages for women participants were 12% and 7%.) (Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Educational Level of U.S. Workforce Up Sharply Over Decade, press release 85-355.)

Among people who are employed, high school dropouts are clustered in occupations that generally have lower status and fewer opportunities for advancement. They are more likely to work as laborers or in service positions; they are less likely to have administrative, technical, or sales jobs.

Poverty

People who do not complete high school are more likely to be poor. In 1984, 22.4% of people aged 22 to 65 years who had dropped out of high school were poor, while 9.8% of those who had completed high school but not gone on to college were. The poverty rate of those who had attended college was 5.4%. The poverty rate of people who left school before 9th grade was 28.4%. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Characteristics of the Population Below the Poverty Level: 1984 (CPS Series P-60, no. 152, table 9.))

Children are much more likely to be poor if their parents do not complete high school. In the 1982-1983 period, 39% of all children in two-parent families were living in poverty if neither the father nor the mother had completed high school. If one or the other had graduated, 20% were poor; if both had, 7% were poor. (Source: House Committee on Ways and Means, Children in Poverty, May 22, 1985, p. 128.)

Social Costs

Dropping out of high school generally has costs for society as well as for individuals. Since adults who have not completed high school generally earn less income, they pay lower taxes than they otherwise would. Their families are more likely to participate in programs for people with limited incomes, such as Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC), Medicaid, Food Stamps, public housing, and job-training for the disadvantaged. Both the reduction in tax revenues and the increased expenditures for these programs represent social costs that are in addition to the sum of costs borne by individuals.

Other social costs of dropping out of high school may also be significant. People without diplomas apparently are more likely to commit crimes and delinquent acts. They participate less in politics and other community affairs. They may be less productive workers, limiting economic growth and competitiveness. Their children often come to share their disadvantages, perpetuating social inequality. (Among the studies of the social costs of dropping out is "The Public Economic Benefits of a High School Education," by Lillian D. Webb, in Educational Need in the Public Economy, by Kern Alexander and K. Forbis Jordan.)

The magnitude of social costs attributable to dropping out of high school is difficult to estimate. Some costs cannot be quantified; few can be isolated from the effects of other characteristics that dropouts have.

Nonetheless, one recent study whose author is mindful of these limitations concluded that high school dropouts in each school class cost the Nation at least $20 billion. (On the Social Costs of Dropping Out of School, by James S. Catterall.) However, so little work has been done on the social costs of not completing high school that such estimates should be used with caution.

What Current Programs for Dropouts Are There?

High school dropout programs have been organized in a number of communities. While several studies of these programs have recently been completed, no data are available on how many there are or on the number of students they serve. Such information is difficult to collect since most dropout programs have been developed by local officials to address problems in individual communities. It is also difficult, and perhaps artificial, to distinguish between programs for dropouts and programs to help disadvantaged students or youth in general. Little information is available about the effectiveness of the programs. Among the organizations that have recently completed studies of dropout programs are the General Accounting Office ("School Dropouts: Survey of Local Programs" GAO/HRD-87-108), the Department of Education ("Dealing with Dropouts: the Urban Superintendents' Call to Action"), and the Structured Employment/Economic Development Corporation (SEEDCO) ("What To Do About Youth Dropouts: A Summary of Solutions").

Types of Local Programs

High school dropout programs can be described from the perspective of their organization, their goals, and the groups they serve. While there is great diversity, some patterns are also evident. Many programs aimed at preventing students from dropping out are organized within regular secondary schools, sometimes just as separate tracks (groupings) of regular courses but sometimes as distinct entities having different courses, teachers, and schedules. Generally the goal of these programs is for students to complete the required number of courses to obtain a regular high school diploma. In contrast, some programs are aimed at helping students reenter after they have already dropped out. Reentry programs are more likely to be separate from regular school programs (sometimes they are in different buildings), particularly if they are for older students. Reentry programs frequently emphasize remedial instruction and often help students prepare for equivalency certificates rather than diplomas. Of course, there are many hybrid examples.

Some programs include employment goals. The Boston Compact, for example, has among its objectives that schools will improve students' math and reading skills and reduce the number of dropouts, while private sector employers will offer both jobs for graduates and summer jobs for continuing students. The Summer Training and Education Program (STEP), with demonstration projects in five cities, provides a combination of work experience, remedial education, and life skills instruction to economically disadvantaged youth at-risk of dropping out.

Some dropout programs focus on students with special needs. A number of school districts have programs for pregnant students, as do some for students who are parents. Some schools have day-care facilities. Some districts have special programs for students for whom English is a second language, for handicapped students, or for delinquents.

The way in which high school dropout programs are organized raises a number of issues. As the programs generally have low student-teacher ratios and additional counseling, it is likely that they cost more per student than regular school programs. Without evaluations, it is not known whether these additional costs are justified. Some dropout programs work with or refer students to health clinics, social service agencies, and welfare services. These arrangements can raise difficult questions about the appropriate role of the school. Other issues include whether dropout programs should maintain or relax normal grading standards, whether they should emphasize helping students' academic or social needs, and whether they should concentrate on students most likely to complete school in contrast to those who are furthest behind (a practice known as "skimming").

High schools without special dropout programs nonetheless may help or encourage students to complete school. Regular school programs sometimes are flexible enough to accommodate the academic needs and interests of potential dropouts. Remedial instruction, close supervision, and extra counseling may be available. It is a matter of debate whether the current school reform movement will affect these efforts to help potential dropouts. Giving able administrators more responsibility, attracting better teachers, and testing students frequently may result in weaknesses being identified and corrected earlier. On the other hand, setting higher standards, assigning more homework, and requiring more academic subjects may discourage weak students and increase their desire to leave.

One unusual approach to dropout prevention is a guarantee that college expenses will be paid if students complete high school. The first program of this type was established 6 years ago by Eugene Lang, an industrialist who made such a promise while addressing the sixth grade class at the Harlem elementary school that he had attended as a child. Recently 48 of the 51 students still residing in the community obtained their diplomas (a high proportion for inner-city schools) and 25 have been accepted by colleges. The program has been duplicated for 100 classes of disadvantaged children in 15 cities.

Federal Programs

The Federal program that currently provides most support for high school dropouts or potential dropouts is the **Job Training Partnership Act** (JTPA). The principal JTPA program, Training for Disadvantaged Youth and Adults (Title II-A; FY88 appropriation, $1.8 billion), provides a wide range of education, training, employment support, and work experience to individuals who are economically disadvantaged or facing employment barriers. States must use a portion of the education set-aside (8% of their Title II-A allocation) for literacy training, dropout prevention, and school-to-work transition. The Summer Youth Program (Title II-B, $718 million) supports on-the-job training, work experience, and supportive

services to youth, including 14-and 15-year olds at local option. Plans must include assessments of participants' reading and math skills and descriptions of remedial education activities. The Job Corps (Title IV, $716 million) is a residential education and training program for severely disadvantaged youth. (For additional information about the JTPA, see CRS Report 83-76, Job Training Partnership Act: Background and Description, by Karen Spar.)

Several **Federal education programs** provide assistance to dropouts or likely dropouts. The Adult Education Act (FY88 appropriation, $124 million) and the Migrant High School Equivalency Program ($7 million) support education programs that include preparation for the GED Test. Upward Bound and Talent Search, two of the Special Programs for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds (TRIO Programs) authorized under the Higher Education Act, support programs to help low-income and potential first-generation college students complete high school. The Department of Education Appropriations Act, 1988, includes $24 million for dropout prevention demonstration programs and $5 million for vocational education dropout prevention initiatives. In addition, other Federal programs may reduce the likelihood that students with special needs or interests will find it difficult or unrewarding to complete their secondary education: Head Start (which provides funds for pre-school programs for disadvantaged children), Chapter 1 of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (compensatory education), the Education of the Handicapped Act, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act, the Bilingual Education Act, and the Indian Education Act. However, research has not been conducted to see if these programs do in fact affect dropout rates.

At one time the Federal Government provided financial assistance to a small number of school districts for the express purpose of preventing students from dropping out of school. Authorized in 1968 under Title VIII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the program funded demonstration projects using "innovative methods, materials, or programs." Altogether 31 projects were supported with $46 million in appropriations from FY69 through FY76. While legislative authority for the program was terminated by the Education Amendments of 1974, States were given the option of funding such projects under Title IV ESEA and, currently, the Chapter 2 Education Consolidation and Improvement Act block grant. No information is available about whether States are electing to use Chapter 2 money for this purpose.

Some Federal education laws have requirements aimed at preventing schools from refusing to provide instruction to students who otherwise might drop out. States receiving assistance under the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) must provide a free appropriate public education to handicapped children between 5 and 17 years of age, inclusive. The prohibition against sex discrimination in Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits schools from expelling, suspending, or otherwise discriminating against pregnant students.

Finally, **Federal health and social welfare programs** may help some students remain in school until they obtain a high school diploma. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Food Stamps, Medicaid, Social Service Block Grant programs, and others provide assistance to families

with problems that often make it difficult for children to do well academically. Without research, however, the actual impact of such programs on the dropout rate can only be surmised.

Federal Legislation on Dropouts

Current Legislative Activity

Federal legislative activity on high school dropouts is occurring on three different fronts. There is legislation to authorize new categorical grants for dropout prevention and reentry demonstration programs. There is legislation for States to permit, or even require, certain welfare recipients who are not high school graduates to enroll in education programs instead of mandatory work or job-training. Finally, legislation is being considered to allow local areas to use Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) Summer Youth Program funds for year-round basic and remedial education for teenage recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

New grants for dropout prevention and reentry demonstration programs would be authorized by H.R. 5, the School Improvement Act of 1987. This legislation, which would amend and reauthorize Federal elementary and secondary education programs, passed the House on May 21, 1987. Under H.R. 5, Federal grants for secondary school basic skills improvement and for dropout programs would be awarded by the Department of Education in FY88, FY89, and FY90, and by State educational agencies the next 3 years. Local educational agencies could use funds they receive for a wide range of activities, both within schools and in cooperation with community organizations and businesses, to help students complete high school. H.R. 5 would also require the Department of Education to develop national indicators of dropout and retention rates and to report on what they were as of March 30 each year. The Senate amendment to H.R. 5 (which was passed on Dec. 1, 1987) would authorize grants for similar purposes through FY93. It would also require the Secretary of Education to develop a standard definition of a dropout and to conduct a one-year study.

Grants for dropout prevention and reentry demonstration programs would also be authorized by H.R. 3, the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1987, as amended and passed by the Senate on July 21, 1987. Grants for the programs, which the Department of Education would award to local educational agencies in fiscal years 1988, 1989, and 1990, could be used for the same kinds of activities as grants awarded under S. 373. H.R. 3 as amended by the Senate would also authorize new secondary school basic skills programs and a number of other education programs. (For additional information on H.R. 3 and H.R. 5, see CRS Issue Briefs 87055, Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Programs: Reauthorization Issues, by Wayne Riddle; and 87108, Education Proposals in Trade Competitiveness Legislation, by Paul Irwin and Wayne Riddle.)

New education opportunities for welfare recipients would be authorized by H.R. 1720, the Family Welfare Reform Act of 1987. This legislation, which the House passed on Dec. 16, 1987, would replace the AFDC program with a Family Support Program (FSP) that among other things requires States to establish an education, training, and work program (NETWORK) for recipients 16 years of age and over (with the exception of people who were ill, pregnant, needed to care for others, etc.)

Recipients who have not completed high school must be given the opportunity to participate in education programs instead of mandatory work or job-training. Similar provisions are included in S. 1511, the Family Security Act of 1987, introduced on July 21, 1987, by Senator Moynihan.

The Administration's welfare reform legislation, the Greater Opportunities through Work Act of 1987 (GROW), would also give welfare recipients who have not completed high school (with certain exceptions) the opportunity to participate in education programs in lieu of mandatory work or job-training. However, GROW would require some recipients under 19 years of age (principally teenage mothers and dependent children over 15 years of age) to participate in programs leading toward a diploma as a condition of maintaining eligibility. At their option, States could also require recipients who were 19 or older to do so. GROW has been introduced in the House as H.R. 1880 and in the Senate as part of S. 539, the Trade, Employment, and Productivity Act of 1987. (For additional information on welfare reform legislation, see CRS Issue Briefs 87007, Welfare, by Vee Burke, and 86094, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC): Work and Training Issues, by Carmen Solomon.)

The Department of Labor proposed in its FY88 budget request that local areas receiving JTPA Summer Youth Program funds be given the option of providing year-round basic and remedial education to teenage AFDC recipients. (For a summary of JTPA programs affecting dropouts, see the previous section.) A modified version of the proposal is included among the provisions of S. 514, the Jobs for Employable Dependent Individuals Act, which the Senate passed on Apr. 2, 1987. Under S. 514, Summer Youth Program funds could be used for year-round basic and remedial education (as well as classes in child care, life planning, etc.) for youth between 16 and 21 years of age, inclusive, (or 14 and 21, if appropriate), who are receiving or are eligible to receive AFDC or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and who are at-risk of becoming long-term unemployed or welfare recipients. H.R. 2246, the comparable House bill (which has not yet been reported), does not contain these amendments. (For additional information on S. 514, see CRS Issue Brief 87039, Job Training: FY88 Budget and Legislative Issues, by Karen Spar.)

Policy Discussion

With present knowledge, it is not possible to estimate what the benefits would be of having more students graduate from high school. As a group adults without diplomas clearly have many disadvantages in life. They generate costs for society. Yet the effects of dropping out cannot easily be separated from the effects of other characteristics dropouts have. For many people, the disadvantages attributed to dropping out would not disappear if they had a diploma. For some, a diploma might not make any difference.

Given uncertainty about whether there are substantial benefits to completing high school, how might policy makers view proposals to reduce dropout rates? How can they be sure that dropout prevention or reentry programs are justified? One consideration is that it may be more important how students finish high school than if they do. If the programs were able to address the problems of students who presently drop out, the benefits of obtaining a diploma would be more certain. If such students had better academic records, for example, they would not be so

different from those who graduate today. Inadequate reading and math skills would no longer reduce their effectiveness as workers. Perhaps they would earn as much as current graduates. While there is something to be said for helping more students get high school diplomas, even if they do not learn anything in the process, programs that simply aim to get more students through school are not likely to have long-lasting benefits.

Another consideration is that the benefits of completing high school might be greater in the future than they are at present. The educational requirements of the 21st century are not likely to be lower. As a consequence, one might argue that the Nation should err in favor of helping more of today's students graduate. Not only will they be working in the next century, but so will their children, who will be influenced by the educational attainment of their parents. On the other hand, even if educational requirements were higher in the future, the benefits of high school graduation might be modest unless students go on to college. For many, dropping out may be no more costly than it is today.

More students might be able to complete high school if there were wider use of equivalency examinations like the General Educational Development Test (GED). While equivalency tests originally were designed to provide academic certification to adults who could not enroll in high school, recently an increasing number of teenagers have also been taking them. For dropouts who cannot complete a regular high school program, equivalency certificates could be a useful option. Some credentials are better than none. However, some recent studies suggest that passing the GED may not provide adequate preparation for either employment or further schooling. (University of Wisconsin Employment and Training Institute, 1986) Until more is known, one might be cautious about viewing equivalency certificates as adequate substitutes for diplomas.

Until dropout programs are carefully evaluated, it will not be clear what needs to be done to help more students complete high school. For the present, it may be useful to recognize that a number of factors generally contribute to decisions to drop out. While dropouts' academic problems often are serious, their willingness to complete school is influenced by school policies, family characteristics, and the opportunities in their communities. Failure to recognize the interrelation of these factors can result in confusing symptoms with causes. Thus a dropout program that addresses only academic weaknesses may not help many students. On the other hand, there are disadvantages in schools attempting to deal with all the factors that affect dropping out. For schools to help at-risk students overcome academic weaknesses is a difficult but arguably manageable task. For schools to change families and communities would be a much larger undertaking. Perhaps the central question is to what extent the high school dropout problem can be solved just by changes in the schools, and to what extent the solution depends upon more general social and economic changes.